

Akita

The origin of the breed



Two Akita males in a typical face-off position (Terrier style) is the way they have always been shown in Japan.

The origin of the breed

The Akita's story is a primeval one. The breed is the descendant of the ancient dog with erect ears and curled tail whose likeness is found carved in the early tombs of the Japanese.

In 660 B.C., dogs were brought to Japan from China and Korea. It is from these ancestral beginnings that the Akita springs. However, actual documentation of its existence didn't occur until the early 17th century when a nobleman exiled to Akita Prefecture, a northern province on the island of Honshu from which the breed takes its name, encouraged the local aristocracy to develop a powerful hunting dog that possessed superior intelligence and courage.

Ownership of one of these dogs was once restricted to the Imperial family and the ruling aristocracy. Detailed care and feeding rituals were developed as well as a special vocabulary used to address the dog or when talking about them. Specially decorated leashes were used denoting rank and standing of the dog and its owner. Each dog was assigned a special caretaker who dressed in ceremonial garb signifying his relationship to the dog and its status in the realm.

The ancient Japanese word *matagi*, meaning esteemed hunter, was bestowed on the best hunters in a village. Historically, the Akita was known as *matagiinu* (esteemed hunting dog) by the hunters of the northern Prefecture of Akita, who used pairs of dogs (a male and a female) to hunt deer, bear, wild boar and Yezo, a type of large, fierce bear. When hunting the Yezo, two dogs held the bear at bay until the hunter arrived with spear or arrow and wild boar. Akitas are highly prized because they hunt silently.

Japanese Akitas



Physically, the Akita is a large dog with upright ears and a curled tail. It has great strength, a keen eye and nose, silence and speed. It has a durable sturdy body suitable for hunting in deep snow. The breed also was developed to retrieve downed waterfowl. Although it has the strength and dentition necessary to crunch through frozen carrion, its "soft" mouth when retrieving and delivering quarry to the hunter's hand ensures downed waterfowl is never mangled. Akitas are even said to have been used to drive fish into waiting nets.

Like Japan's historical warrior class, the samurai, the Akita became a fighting dog in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this period, other breeds were infused to enhance its fighting ability. However, after the Akita was declared a natural monument in 1931, a movement began with the goal of restoring the breed to its original, prefighting form. At that time, three separate organizations formed to register it, each having a breed standard of its own.

The Akita thrives on companionship. The dog is dignified, good-natured, alert, affectionate, docile, and courageous. It is fearless, intelligent, and has a somewhat stubborn attitude. It is reserved in demeanor with a strong protective instinct.

The Akita has spiritual significance in Japan. Small statues of this dog are typically given at the birth of a child to ensure health, happiness, and a long life. They may be given during an illness as a get well wish. Statues also stand guard over many tombs of the dead.

The renowned Helen Keller brought the first Akitas to the United States when a pair of dogs was presented to her as a gift from the Japanese Ministry of Education. After World War II, occupational forces returning from Japan brought the dogs they admired home and the popularity of the breed increased.

Japanese Akitas

